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UNCLAS MUSCAT 001157

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD, NEA/P, IIP/G/NEA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: MORE PARDONS, LESS PAPERS

REF: MUSCAT 972

1. Summary: The Omani Internet message boards "al-Sablah" and "al-Majarra" are the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language fora for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, these popular sites nevertheless offer a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- More Pardons From The Sultan
-- A Proposal For An "Opposition" Magazine
-- Which Is The Best Newspaper in Oman?

End summary.

To Err Is Human

2. Coming on the heels of last month's royal pardons (reftel), the July 19 news of the Sultan's pardoning of 369 more prisoners (septel) elicited mainly laudatory responses from al-Sablah members. "We congratulate the families of the arrestees, and all Omanis, for this gift from His Majesty" and "Long live our wise leader, who is saving the country from internal conflicts" were two commonly expressed sentiments. One member hoped that "the secret organization file should be closed for good, so the

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security agencies can no longer use it as an excuse to arrest people."

Plenty of Ammunition In This Magazine

3. Al-Sablah participants took a jaundiced view of a report alleging that the Ministry of Information intends to publish an "opposition" magazine, focusing on controversial topics within Omani society. "This is just one more instance of the Ministry of Information lamely trying to show that they allow freedom of expression," bemoaned one observer. Another declared, "The media in our country is a lie. This new magazine is a hopeless case, because it will be controlled by the Ministry of Information and it will only represent the government's position." Never missing an opportunity to involve the United States, one participant claimed, "The magazine would just be an attempt to show the Americans that we are democratic, and that we allow others to express their opinions freely."

All The News That's Fit To Print

4. A similar contempt for Oman's existing print media surfaced when one al-Sablah member asked, "Which is the best newspaper in Oman?" Among the overwhelmingly negative responses, several referenced the lack of variety: "All the newspapers have the same ideology. They only publish the government line; all we get is what the government wants us to know." Others added, "Why read the Omani papers? Their `reports' are usually weeks behind the regional newspapers."

5. Wrote one wag, "I really like the design and graphics of the newspapers, especially the large advertisements that take up the space of real news." At least one participant did try to answer the original question: "Actually I like `al-Watan' [a privately-owned, widely-read Arabic daily] because they are more objective and capture the feeling of the street. For example, they describe Israelis as Zionists, and Palestinians as martyrs instead of suicide bombers."

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